

Diversity, Canons, and Cultures

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Call me the first victim of political correctness. I wrote a book that, counter to every expectation, became a number one best-seller, and thereupon became the target of very intense hatred. I discovered that there are passions afoot in our land, akin in their ferocity to those of the religious wars of the seventeenth century, which seek to transform education and to transform our souls. In me they found the perfect enemy and, in their concentration on me, revealed what they are. Very simply, according to them, one is not allowed to speak about race or gender dispassionately. One is not allowed to ask questions rather than repeat the correct answers proposed by today's activists. Those who would dare speak out would be forced to wear scarlet letters advertising themselves as racists or sexists. Sensitivity is more important than love of truth. I remember a young woman who, during the question period after a lecture I gave at Oberlin College, shaking with rage, and with tears flowing from her eyes, said, "I am offended by your calling on three men before you called on a woman. This shows that you are condescending to women." When a victim, and in this theology all women are victims, says she is offended, the one who offended her is *prima facie* guilty of insensitivity. Therefore, he must adapt himself to his accuser so that she will not feel *excluded*. Excluding persons from the community is the great crime. The community itself has systematically excluded, and therefore it must be transformed root and branch. In this atmosphere, there are three possible reactions to such assaults. The majority identify with their accusers and eagerly try to "clean up their act." Others avoid hot issues because they do not want to ruin their careers by wearing the scarlet letter. A third group continues to tilt with

windmills, saying what they believe, and reaping pariahdom as their reward.

In my book, I identified this phenomenon under the ironic rubric “openness.” I meant by this a dogma that everyone must believe there is no truth in order to guarantee respect for the diverse views of the truth present in the world. Translated into political practice, this means the majority’s “truths” are untrue and the minority’s “truths” are true. The very activity, proper to philosophy and so admirably represented in Aristotle’s *Politics*, of trying to sort out and judge various claims of truth about justice, becomes suspect, or even itself an injustice. This is an absolutist relativism driven by the political intention to overcome liberal democracy’s claims to justice.

The inevitable consequence of this position is gross intolerance, an unreasoning hatred of “Western Civilization,” which has excluded and made unhappy all minorities. From this “openness” emerges the closing of the American mind or, I might amend this to say, the closing of any mind. A mind is closed in the most important respect when it can no longer rationally address the question “What is happiness?” or “What is the good life?” The light of the mind is dimmed or extinguished when this first and foremost of questions is suppressed. That question is the whole source of liberal education. Students are told today that they cannot and must not address it. They cannot address it because there is no truth to be found, and they should not because any truth they think they may have found might perpetuate the system of exclusion. This position has the wonderful effect of unmaning the beliefs of the majority and permitting the minorities to be thoughtless and passionate. Thus we produce intolerant tolerance. It is possible that relativism is theoretically true, but relativism can give no guidance, moral or political. When it is adopted as a political doctrine, it becomes self-contradictory, although it can be used as a blunt instrument to bludgeon opponents in a society whose insistence on rational discourse has weakened.

Finally, this ugly partisan spirit has been publicly identified, and Americans who take the First Amendment, with its protection of free speech, as the core of our regime have become concerned. The worm is turning, if ever so slightly. This New Left made a critical blunder when it identified its doctrine as political correctness. The liberalism of the silent majority was shocked by this and has begun to recognize a threat. However, this salutary political awareness remains superficial because political correctness is understood to be just another fanaticism in a society that, while granting free expression to its fanatics, is designed to prevent their easy victory. But this particular sect is not merely bullying. It brings with it a whole metaphysic, one that is actually shared

implicitly by many of the less thoughtful opponents of the new orthodoxy. Political correctness is possible only against the background of theoretical decay, and its principles must be confronted. Arthur Schlesinger attacked me for my criticism of relativism. He insisted that the American tradition is relativist and that the Declaration of Independence's "self-evident truths" are a proof of that relativism. But when he became aware that perspectivism, one of the new terms used by the movement, carried with it an attack on his discipline, history, he started shrieking that we must stop this attack on objectivity. Did he think that relativism concerned preference for flavors of ice cream, chocolate versus vanilla? Relativism in its contemporary form means precisely that there can be no objectivity. There are an almost infinite number of souls, connected to the almost infinite number of cultures, which interpret the world in different ways. There is no higher authority, no possible arbitration between or among their various views. Each folk or culture mind is its own judge and interprets an essentially chaotic world in ways that are congenial to it. It does no good to scream at these dogmatic relativists if one is unwilling and unable, as is Professor Schlesinger, to meet relativistic arguments.

I made this clear in my analysis of the almost universal use of the word "value" for what used to be called good and bad. Value means a belief, not a truth. It means that man gives himself views about good and bad that have no ground other than his will to believe them. This in turn means that will and passion are more important than reason. Diversity of values is the ground for war, although it is trumpeted today as the means to peace. Only when we are willing to come to grips with the arguments for this interpretation of good and evil as values will we have grounds for resisting what is going on. The value interpretation or, under one of its other names, historicism, has reigned supreme for two generations in the humanities. The radicals are now just drawing the conclusions. My insistence on this made academic conservatives (who think they are liberals) suspicious of me. They want to remain in their dogmatic slumber and call my radical arguments conservative. Let me say simply that, for me, true openness is the willingness to doubt one's own most cherished opinions in order to replace them by truer ones. Openness in its current form is a license to stick by one's prejudices without the necessity or possibility of criticizing them.

My most fatal error in the eyes of my politically correct critics was to praise the reading of good books as the core of a liberal education. This is an important part of what made my book so popular with the public at large. Ordinary Americans sensed the absence of a worthwhile leisure in their lives and an incapacity to address the big questions. In addition, they were troubled by their children's lack of interest in books

and their inability to communicate such an interest to them. I gave a qualified and highly nuanced praise to the Great Books curriculum promoted by the former president of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins, and continued most notably in institutions like St. John's College. I have great reserves about the program that produced me, but I believe that it was the only game in town when it came to promoting the interests of liberal education. I am persuaded that it is much more important to read one or two books of quality seriously, and digest them so as to become part of one's flesh and blood, than to swallow a whole list of books. I won't detail here my doubts. They are in my book.

The Great Books idea has always been controversial. Modern scholars insisted that they were the only ones who could competently read old books, and therefore, that a direct reading by amateurs without the assistance of the scholarly apparatus is impossible. And these scholars were, almost to a man, historicists. You cannot read old books as though they might contain the truth. You can't pick up Aristotle and treat him as a contemporary and a friend. He is a child of his times, and you must let the historicists tell you what those times were really like and the essential limits on the thoughts of Aristotle that made it inferior to the thought of the historicists. The Great Books idea defied the premises of most modern scholarship. We Great Bookies were always in the minority, but there was nonetheless some kind of widespread unexamined and implicit assumption that it is useful to read the books of the tradition.

But my very modest intention to get people to read good books for the sake of the richness of their souls turned out to be the primary cause of the violent attacks on me. And now it is books themselves that have become bad. This violent assertion is implausible to most people and to common sense. But it is today the majority opinion among professors of humanities, supported by the moral pathos of exclusion and the money of foundations. Its respectable (respectable at least to television talk show hosts) expression is "multiculturalism" and "non-Western content." They say: "It's only fair that non-white, non-Western, non-male persons should have equal representation with their opposites who have dominated the curriculum." That seems only reasonable if you start looking at it in this way. Nobody ever thought of looking at it like this before, but that can be corrected by raising consciousness. In the past, Plato and Kant were read to get information about the nature of things and how to go about understanding it. We did not know that everybody was just telling tales or myths in order to establish himself at the top of the social heap. But now we know that and we can see that they are enemies that need to be deconstructed in order for the oppressed to replace them as kings of the hill.

Unarticulated in this, of course, is the fact that the disadvantaged

want to become oppressors in their turn. This newly enlightened age has recognized that false consciousness is the cause of our moral flaws and that books are the cause of that consciousness. These half-Marxists turn Marx on his head. It is not the control of the means of production that causes thought, but the reverse. The washed out, tired and discredited, irrelevant professors of the humanities are reborn as the primary agents of revolution, the liberators from Eurocentric poison of the inmates of their discipline. They are no longer passive conveyor belts of the tradition, but the destroyers of it. My gentle advocacy of Great Books made me the enemy of mankind. I was even accused in the prestigious *Times Literary Supplement* of having blood on my hands in Nicaragua. All of this makes for an interesting psychological study.

As part of this movement, the books that people have perennially read for the sake of inspiration and liberation have been baptized anew and emerged as "the canon." And in popular newspapers and on television talk shows there is continuous talk about reforming the canon, which is treated as though it were a golf club that excludes blacks and women. Cast in this light, these great sources of independent thought and social criticism seem to be a part of the domain of thoughtless reactionaries, a doomed remnant of the past, as was segregation in the South. The revolutionaries say, "You exclude me," and the conservatives say, "This is the way we have always done things." They taunt each other across the barricades, the one group yelling "Western Civilization," the other "Non-Western Civilization." The reactionaries are somewhat hampered when they are qualified as white Western males, because in this day and age, no one is permitted to use the opposites as unflattering epithets. When the issue is framed thus, it is clear who is going to win: "You've got your canon, why can't we have ours? We need memories of our roots; we need role models; we need pride in ourselves and to show others, as well as ourselves, what we have accomplished. You are robbing us of our heritage and our self-respect." All this is very plausible to those who have no experience with the real meaning and purpose of books, particularly professors of the humanities. This rhetoric, although it is as superficial and noxious as the rhetoric of communist and fascist parties, is worth analysis, an analysis that requires a liberal education, to understand the longings that it expresses and the deep thought that lies behind it and that it trivializes. In this half-educated country, there is now neither charming natural common sense nor the presence of real philosophy. Words like "value," "culture," and "canon" are part of our sorry, impoverished slang. Behind each of these words is a whole, interesting but questionable, interpretation of the world of which those who use its language are unaware and of which they are hence prisoners.

In a preliminary way I would argue that books such as those of Aristotle and Machiavelli were read and can still be read because they tell us so much about ourselves, things one cannot find elsewhere, things on which almost all other thinkers are dependent. Aristotle tells us what courage is, and courage is of interest to all men and women, everywhere and at all times. The challenge is to find a better account. You won't find it easily, but there should be no attempt to prevent such alternative accounts from having their day in court.

Most people and even most scholars don't care to think very much, and classic books deteriorate into a mere tradition with them. But that tradition is useful insofar as it has preserved the memory of the existence of these books with a fair degree of accuracy as to their relative merit. When I was young I read histories of political philosophy by MacIlwain and Sabine, who had no real interest in Locke and were preoccupied with the latest, now dead, contemporary liberal teachings. But they somehow knew that Locke was essential and pointed it out to me. One had to go back and read him all over again, after which their books were almost useless. But without them, it would have been very difficult to discover him. We are now in a situation where, according to the great authority of Stanford University, we no longer need Locke. The tradition of scholarship is not able to argue adequately why we do need him, but it preserved him for a while from the barbarian invasions that, with their fancy intellectual terminology, are about to overwhelm us. Maybe Aristotle (who was from Asia Minor) was some kind of a Westerner, but this is not the reason why we read him. If there is someone, to quote Plato, "in some barbaric place," climbing the peaks of philosophy, there is no reason why he should not come to join the conversation. There is no good reason to accept the notion that there is an exclusionary rule against non-Westerners and that the statistical evidence proves discrimination. In the midst of all this demagoguery, one must remember that most of mankind never learned to write. This incapacity is compensated for by anthropologists, who are more than willing to tell us what the unlettered think; but, until proof of the contrary, these interpretations must be understood as imperial attempts on the part of the anthropologists to empower themselves and must be accounted as part of modern Western thought. Then we are told that Islam, the thought of which has both Greek and biblical roots, is non-Western. And even more extreme is the edict that Latin America is non-Western, when the only real difference is that it was colonized by Spaniards and Portuguese while North America was colonized primarily by the English and the French. All are equally Europeans. When it comes down to it, practically the only non-Westerners who wrote books are the Indians, the Chinese, and the Japanese, and no one is saying their books

should not be read. Of course, one can, and some do, take another step—in the name of antilogocentrism—and denigrate books altogether.

However stupid it may sound, a book should be read in the same way we read the instruction manual that comes with our computer or our stereo system to find out how it works. We don't ask about the race or sex of the person who wrote it, unless perhaps its writer doesn't know how to make the machine work. A long experience with and temptation by these sophisticated theories that emphasize the race, class, and sex of authors has proved to me that there is almost nothing to them, and that the deep and interesting thing is instead to try to figure out what an author like Aristotle meant. For example, he was the founder of women's liberation when he defined a barbarian not as someone who lives in this or that country but as someone who treats a woman like a slave. He meant that reason, observing nature, proves that this is a violation of the nature of things. But if there is no nature and no capacity to observe it dispassionately, then only custom and passion rule, and these, always and everywhere, have enslaved women. The attacks on philosophy always assume that its fundamental premises will still be maintained when nobody believes in them or even knows about them anymore.

Every educational system is, of course, a mass of stupidities and incoherences. I say stupidities, rather than calculations and intentions of the ruling class. Educational systems are always ripe for reform, but unfortunately, most of the reformers are the ones with the exploitative political intentions. The American universities are mixtures of responses to practical demands by the various groups that make up the country, half-hearted attempts to teach something about the political regime we live under, and a tiny bit of concern for eternity. With the unerring instinct of fanatical obscurantism, our new movements have zeroed in on that one little bit of concern for eternity and are succeeding in suffocating its already wasted vitality.

The word "canon" appeals to our taste for abstraction from real experience. It tells us all we need to know, without really knowing anything. The books we read are simply the expression of the will to power of dead white Western males, whose lifeless hand is upon us. As it is stated, this is so grotesque an interpretation that it could not be considered seriously by any serious person if it were not a part of current madness. How did this happen? That is the interesting question. Why do such people never ask themselves how it is that Greece, which was very weak, conquered by the Romans, managed to conquer them intellectually? But I need not go on, for all evidence confutes the theories of our revolutionaries.

It has been suggested that *The Closing of the American Mind*¹ did not adequately address the radicals' claim that all education is deeply political. Let me clarify my views on this issue. Throughout my career, following my great teacher, Leo Strauss, I have argued that the humanities were withering away because they systematically neglected the political content, and even intentions, of the great writers in favor of a concentration on intimate psychological details or their metaphysical teachings. I am a follower of Aristotle in believing that man is a political animal and that his first concern is the quest for justice and the good regime, which will incorporate it. This I argue is also the first concern of the greatest writers. For example, most of the plays of Shakespeare concern this quest, and the neglect of it diminishes their interest and leads to misinterpretations of them. Moreover, I think it not unlikely that Shakespeare wished to influence not only the political regime of his own country, but those of all countries. I am persuaded that students who do not have a healthy political passion, a love of justice that inquires about the best regime, are maimed in their pursuit of knowledge. If they lack such a passion, or do not bring it to their studies, they are likely to be either bores or triflers. I am all for political passion and make every attempt to liberate young people from all the constraints that forbid its expression.

What I deny is that there is no possibility of pure love of the truth with respect to the quest for justice. And that is the crucial assertion of deconstructionism, postmodernism, and all that jazz. Universities are dedicated particularly to disinterested pursuit of the knowledge of justice, and these people deny from the outset that such knowledge is possible. Shakespeare must be, in a ukase published by the American Council of Learned Societies, interpreted as an ideologist of early colonialism. I do believe that Shakespeare reflected on most of the great questions of modernity as well as those of antiquity. But, until proof of the contrary—and there is so far no proof, only assertion—I insist that Shakespeare thought those questions through on his own and presents independent views from which we can still learn. He was, I am morally certain, independent of the prejudices of his own age as well as our own. If indeed the relationship between Prospero and Caliban in *The Tempest* treats of the confrontation between a higher civilization and a lower one, it does so not in terms of the brute spirit of British conquest, but in terms of Shakespeare's own and independent knowledge of justice from which we could learn so much if we could for a moment set aside our furious spirit of party. Similarly, Aristotle says that he does not belong to the party of the democrats, or the oligarchs, or any party except that of the truth. He listens to the claims of all the parties and helps us to distinguish between those that have merit and those that do

not. His is the still voice of reason that attempts to moderate the passions that lead men to believe that partial views of justice are whole ones. His is an austere and lonely discipline.

What the deconstructionists contend is that there is no such discipline, that everyone is a partisan of one of these partial and self-interested sects. We had become so used to hearing that Aristotle was a representative of the slave-holding oligarchs, as Marxists of one sort or another believed, or that his unresolved Oedipal struggle made him prey to systems of domination, as Freudians would have it, that we had very little with which to resist this somewhat more radical onslaught of the same. I believe that those who make these arguments, however intellectual they may be, have no experience of the philosophic spirit. They look within themselves and generalize that no one could really love the truth. But the possibility of this love is what is at stake, and what deserves our deepest meditation. If the love of truth is impossible, we must close up the universities and leave things to the real struggle for power.

These academics are followers of Nietzsche, who teaches that the love of truth is an affect of the will to power. Nietzsche was a serious thinker and deserves our careful attention. But we cannot begin by assuming that he is right and without thinking of the consequences of his assertions. My objection to the radicals is not to their contentions about politics, but to their being closed to any kind of thought about their contentions. I have been understood to say that there is nothing to these arguments about power. That is not correct. I was studying Nietzsche and Heidegger when they were either unknown or despised in this country, before they became fashionable and a means for getting attention. I insist that the study of Nietzsche and Heidegger is essential for us. What nauseates me is the philistinism and ignorance of these persons who think that a metaphysical argument *ad hominem* can take the place of discussion. Nietzsche teaches not only that we must apply our theories to others, which makes it easy to prove their truth, but that we must above all apply them to ourselves and see whether the shoe pinches. We need not so much a Freudian interpretation of some hysterical woman as a Freudian interpretation of Freud. Do his theories about dreams emerge from his desire to sleep with us or to dominate us, or are they intended to be truths? A Marxist interpretation of Marx might teach us about Marx's own ideological class interests. I do not think that this is easy to do in such relatively high cases, but it is quite easy to do with this new breed of academics, who use their theories to get control of universities and are succeeding quite well at it. They certainly are looking for and getting power. They have such shriveled souls as to want to dominate universities where, as Henry Kissinger put it, the struggles

are so nasty because the stakes are so small. The only reason for a serious human being to be in a university is for love of the truth, and if that doesn't exist, a person with greatness of soul would inevitably go into politics. Only a pygmy would think a university worthy of conquest, but jobs there do feed bellies and the petty vanities of the vainglorious.

I want now to discuss two of the buzz words of our Newspeak: "diversity" and "culture." The two terms are related in that by diversity we mean diversity of cultures. Diversity is now taken to be something sacred; not something one can think about, but a kind of trump card. The accusation that someone is not favoring diversity is enough to send him scampering with his tail between his legs. The good thing about America, if there is still said to be any good thing about it, is its wonderful diversity of cultures, rather than, as an older way of looking at it would say, its miraculous forming of unity out of great diversity. It is alleged that we are now much more diverse than we ever were and therefore must transform our educations so as to encourage and fertilize our present diversity. Unity—how you get it out of heterogeneity of human types and principles—has disappeared as a theme.

Personally, I am very doubtful whether America today is any more diverse than it was in 1900, when it was teeming with immigrant Irish, Italians, Poles, and so on, as well as the despised WASPs, and the blacks. And there were even, so far as I can determine, women here. One might argue that the Asians today do indeed represent something different from the others, who were all raised, one way or the other, in the biblical tradition. But in general, the proposition about our new diversity requires examination, and in this, as in so many other things, one should not roll over and let such claims go unexamined when so much depends upon it. I would suggest that the change is much more in the status of diversity and in the stridency of the voices that promote it. In the past, right up through the civil rights movement, but prior to the emergence of the black power movement in the late sixties, the various groups strove to become Americans. Now they are told by intellectuals and their leaders that they should be inspired by what they once were and what separates them from the American public as a whole. Nothing could be further from Martin Luther King's insistence that blacks are the true Americans than the assertion that blacks are distinguished by forming a separate culture, one that is irreducibly opposed to Eurocentrism. It is argued that no education can be a good one without the presence of diversity in the student population. The conclusion of this line of reasoning is that Athens, Rome, Britain, France, and Germany did not have a serious system of education or high intellectual life. The political success of Rome and England was clearly founded on

the homogeneity of their ruling classes. The decline and fall of Rome has usually been attributed to the bewildering diversity of nations and religions incorporated into it by the empire. There was no common ground left for political action. The American Founders wanted, and this is what is new in their understanding, to form a true nation or people despite the diversity of the elements that were to compose it. They concentrated on what men simply are, as in "all men are created equal. . . ." They planned a nation capable of common purpose and political determination without the harshness of the ancient legislators, who imposed a unity of belief and action on their citizens. It was not known whether this would be possible. They took it to be a great gamble, combining nation building with gentle tolerance. They would not interfere with diverse ways of life or religion, except within the very narrow limits imposed by absolute political necessity. But they would never encourage the extremes of diversity or regard them, as such, as a good thing. They would have expected that gradually, the differences brought here from elsewhere, or fostered by the terrible fact of slavery, would be attenuated by the common experience of the nation's life. This democracy was understood to be future oriented rather than past oriented. Its inhabitants, again with the notable exception of the blacks, immigrated here because they wanted to get away from the horrors of the lands from which they came. The nostalgia for the culture of their distant fatherlands is an indulgence of the third and fourth generations in this country, and the intellectuals want to impose this diversity on populations that frequently have little taste for it.

The changed status of diversity is a very interesting phenomenon, and we could set up a number of interesting courses to understand how it came to pass, how the charm of diversity replaced the striving for the unity of perfection. But the current insistence in America today on diversity, or the latching onto the idea of diversity celebrated by certain European thinkers, is fairly easily explicable. It is founded on the conviction that liberal democracy has failed in its project of treating individuals as individuals and offering them equal opportunity along with a relatively high degree of tolerance for the diversity of the groups that persist within it. The new project attempts to replace the old one with a scheme for treating this land as a mosaic of groups and forcing what are alleged to be the previously dominant groups to abandon their spurious sense of superiority. For whatever it is worth, this is the idea.

Insofar as we are talking about universities, the real and permanent attractiveness of this theme of diversity consists in the view that a serious intellectual life requires a diversity of well-thought-out opinions about the fundamental questions if there is to be any hope of achieving the unity of the truth. The truth is our goal, no matter how much the

demagogues try to suppress our love of the truth in the name of sensitivity, but since we do not have full access to the truth, this high-level diversity in thought is very desirable for us. Political correctness undertakes to stifle the profound diversity in thought that existed in the past, the dangerous and attractive diversity that opposed believers to non-believers, materialists to idealists, democrats to aristocrats. I believe that we are in this decisive respect, to our great loss, much less diverse than men and women of the past were, and that the range of respectable alternatives of serious thought has been narrowed.

Milton Friedman may be opposed to the socialism of John Kenneth Galbraith, but only on the basis of a profound agreement, that the purpose of society is to provide material well-being to the population at large. The difference consists in a disagreement about the means to the actualization of their shared good. No one in this country is conservative in the sense of being able to believe or to speak publicly, as conservatives did in the past, about limiting the franchise to a small aristocracy or, as theologians once did, about dedicating society to the renunciation of worldly goods for the sake of salvation. Our diversity of groups is, as Harvey Mansfield has said, more like the Coca-Cola ad, where people of different races, nations, and sexes sing the same song "in perfect harmony." Such harmony is achieved by a reasoning akin to this: "If the beautiful think they are beautiful, they will try to dominate the not beautiful and make them have low self-esteem. Therefore, we must abandon the idea of the beautiful and suppress our longing for it for the sake of tolerance and everyone's feeling good about themselves." Aristophanes wrote a comedy about this, *Assembly of Women*, and I recommend it highly. The question is whether this maiming of our best instincts is really required for a reasonably tolerant society and whether this fragmentation is actually the royal road to our all getting along together.

Diversity as we understand it is connected with the idea of "culture"—a nebulous and elusive word that we use so easily without being aware of how difficult and fateful it is. Culture emerged as a category in the early nineteenth century and was a word used by conservatives to denote an opposition to the triumphant march of the Rights of Man throughout all nations, a march signaled by the American and French revolutions. Natural rights or the rights of man are cosmopolitan and are insisted on in every country, destroying the ancestral modes of organizing politics and everyday life. The self-determination of women destroys almost all traditional societies and is almost unstoppable when reason is taken as the highest authority. The strategy for defeating revolutionary cosmopolitanism was to argue that the great nations were a result not of reason but of a mysterious web of particular circumstances

that produced Englishmen, Frenchmen, Germans, or Russians rather than human beings. This would justify their “peculiar institutions,” such as the exclusion of the greater part of the population from political participation, an established church, the acceptance of its dogmas, even slavery, and put them above criticism. Superficial reason, it was alleged, could not reach the profound depths of culture. The argument was adopted largely to protect national ways of life and to prevent the homogenization of mankind that liberalism threatened. What a culture is, how it comes to be, and what authority it has over us remains murky, but as long as the cultures were identical to certain well-known political entities like England or France, much of the difficulty of the term remained masked. French culture meant the distinctive French way of life, and it was clearly distinctive. Why it should remain distinctive was answered by the assertion, “That is too deep a thing for analysis by superficial rationalist reformers.” The nation is a mystic unity. In practice, the idea of culture was a kind of ideology of nationalism, and one can see why its first successes in the United States were among white Southerners.

The notion of culture was radicalized by Nietzsche who, in the light of the continuing decay of the European nations, was led to think about the origins or the foundings of cultures in the hope of founding a new European culture. Here is where the word “value” comes into existence as the crucial term for understanding human things. Man needs values in order to live, and no great or profound values can come out of Enlightenment or liberal rationalism. Cultures are essentially producers of values, beliefs about good and bad, tables of the law. They emerge from the creative unconscious of nations, a thing far deeper than the conscious reason of political men and legislators. Inasmuch as values cannot be the same for all men if there is to be a true culture, the diverse value systems are at war, beyond conflict resolution, because some values say that empire is good and others that national self-determination is good; some say that aristocracy is good and others that monarchy is good; and so on, endlessly. Great values, according to which peoples can live, are the products of great men and of victorious conflict. This means that the formation of man by culture is a harsh business, like the sculptor’s hammering the stone in order to produce the statue. A lot of the stone is smashed, and the rest takes a terrific beating. There is no nature of man; man exists only in the peculiar vision of the artist culture-maker.

This teaching of Nietzsche’s about culture is obviously much farther to the right in its profound rejection of equality than is its predecessor, and it provided whatever core of serious thought there was present in fascism. This assertion has earned me some of the nastiest criticism,

but I can only reiterate that at the roots of much current leftist thought in the United States is fascist thought. My contention is supported by the fact that the profound philosophical source of it, Martin Heidegger, and Paul de Man, who popularized deconstruction in the United States, were both sympathizers with Hitler. The notion of culture, in its turn, is revolutionary, but revolutionary in the name of suppressing the spirit of the American and French revolutions, which did not respect culture. Whereas the identification of culture with Europe and Europe's mission to rule the world kept it within the limits of the comprehensible, now what a culture is and how to act in relation to it becomes even vaguer. What is interesting about our situation is that this dangerous, antiliberal notion has become sacred for the left in the United States today. Does it not really force us into war when we are speaking about peace? A thinker like Michel Foucault is very good at identifying the harsh bonds that culture imposes on us. He longs for liberation from them, but he too is a culture-thinker and does not realize that if there are no such harsh bonds of culture, man will not exist. He no longer has the option of resting his case with Enlightenment universality and the nature of man. He wants culture and doesn't want it. Like all such thinkers, he hates liberal democracy, that is, bourgeois society as one finds it in Europe and the United States, but he is unable to understand Nietzsche's clear-sighted vision of what it takes to make an alternative to that bourgeois society. All this is very far away from Marx's Enlightenment view that there should be a universal homogeneous society where man is only man.

The link of culture to the left was partly made by cultural anthropologists who examined and fell in love with various primitive peoples they were pleased to call cultures. They are aware that modern science would destroy those cultures, and therefore oppose the advance of science among them. They are, of course, wholly inconsistent when they want modern medicine to help save lives among these primitive people in times of plague or famine. They are even more inconsistent when they regret the presence in these peoples of such colorful practices as the circumcision of women. But in their inconsistency, they practice a half-way Nietzscheanism, and they insist that the distinction between high and low culture, which Nietzsche at all costs wished to establish, be suppressed. "Thus far and no further," to paraphrase Kant, "proud culture." This critique of pure culture insists reason cannot judge; reason cannot establish rights. But these same anthropologists are, without any grounds to stand on, great believers in human rights even though there are no human beings; there are only cultures.

Now I must confess my perplexity as to how this notion of culture can guide us in our national problems. What do you do, when so many

“cultures” are co-present, to preserve them in any vital way? The culture proponents’ real objection to modern liberal society was that it has no culture because it is too weak to impose its values. It is producing a decayed, brutish type of last man—last because the cultural conditions for humanity have disappeared. The highest unifying value of a culture was God, and a nation whose political regime is founded on the separation of church and state is already doomed. A national way of life separated from the way of life imposed by a serious religion is debilitated, according to the cultural understanding. Most of the anthropologists are atheists, but they tip their hand when they give such a high place to the publicly sacred in the primitive tribes they study. Culture becomes, in the American context, a kind of all-purpose category in which one includes all kinds of claims on the polity without having to argue for them.

Culture is taken to be a very high thing, but can one reasonably say, “I will die for my culture,” as men used to say that they would die for their god or their country? Culture is, at least partly, a timid way for half-believers to have the advantages of religion without religion. So much of the talk about roots and community emerges from this murky source, this incapacity to speak decisively about this most important issue. Thus, the discussion of culture degenerates into things like musical styles, language, and tastes in food. The importance or the necessity of preserving these things is lost because their relation to the highest beliefs and principles is lost. Every year in Chicago there is a festival called Taste of Chicago, where the different nationalities have booths where you can eat their food. This is pleasant and charming, but nobody is willing to sacrifice anything to preserve the habit of eating the food their mothers and grandmothers cooked. Those who work at the booths go back the next day to living and working like everyone else in this country. It is at best a sentimental exercise. It is an American way of rendering harmless what were once murderous oppositions, rendering them harmless by removing the nerve of principle.

Still, the word culture retains some of its original force, so that as soon as someone raises the flag of culture, his or her cause gains a certain respect. In the past one spoke of the bad habits of kids. Now we speak of “youth culture.” The former authorized the supervision and education by adults who hoped to correct them; the latter inspires attentive admiration and expectant observation, which disarms criticism. This suits the wish of all the tawdry commercial interests who pander to the “youth culture.”

There are three reasons for wanting to study cultures today. The first is the old scholarly quest to satisfy our curiosity about other ways, curiosity begun in the West by Odysseus in his travels and honorably con-

tinued by Herodotus and so many others up to the present day. This is not something that has been neglected in Western intellectual life. In fact, it is only in the West that there has been such study. It stemmed from a distinction that first emerged in Greece and has not been known where Greek thought was not known, a distinction between our ways and the good ways. In other words, the Greeks discovered the danger of ethnocentrism and thought it a thing to be combated. They and their students are, contrary to contemporary allegations, the only ones who fought the struggle. The modern proponents of culture wanted to suppress this distinction because the quest for other ways weakened one's own way. The postmodern proponents want to suppress it to overcome ethnocentrism and promote study of and respect for other cultures. But such study of cultures requires the demon "objectivity," which is the target of contemporary criticism. In this case, as in so much else, contemporary critics want to have their cake and eat it. In the name of respect for other cultures they attack the rationalism necessary for respectful attention to other cultures so they can reaffirm cultures that do not respect other cultures.

Thus, proper academic study is replaced by two related partisan arguments for the teaching, not really the study, of other cultures: humiliating Western pride and boosting the self-esteem of minorities. It might be helpful to illustrate what is going on by pointing to the academic voices expressing concern about and hostility to the five-hundredth-anniversary celebration of Columbus's discovery of the Americas. In the past such anniversaries were the occasion for self-congratulation and contented reflection on the progress of civilization, the advantages to mankind at large, and the foundation of political liberty, to all of which this discovery led. But now, many intellectuals tell us that Columbus was the initiator of very great crimes, the fruits of which white Western males guiltily enjoy. Racism, sexism, colonialism, imperialism, as well as destruction of the environment are the true legacies of Columbus. Most of all, the true cultures that existed in the "new world" were destroyed in the name of rootless cosmopolitanism. So these people wish to be party poopers. Their views might be the occasion for serious philosophical reflection on the meaning and value of progress. But they are not the occasion for such reflections; they are merely dogmatic assertions, challenging democracy's liberal individualism in the name of organic and rooted cultures. The worst crime is not denying a man his natural and universal human rights, as the liberal tradition would have it, but the destruction of cultures that, of course, never recognized individual rights.

This charade has already advanced to the point where in elementary

schools in the state of New York, students must be taught that the Iroquois Native Americans were the founders of the American federal system, and not Montesquieu and the American Founders. This is intended to make us grateful to the Indians, whose creative culture we so brutally destroyed, to delegitimize the American regime, to make us feel guilty, and to blunt our intellectual instruments. Of course there is nothing whatsoever to this claim about the Iroquois founding federalism. It is simply untrue. But if you are a perspectivist, then you don't have to worry about truth. There are just a variety of perspectives or interpretations and this one about the Iroquois is meant to replace the perspective of the bandits called the American Founders. The means for replacing the old view by the new one is not rational debate but the exercise of power, an exercise that will empower the Native Americans. The real political advantages of this ridiculous position are irresistibly great for those who want to give Native Americans esteem while taking it away from the old oppressive majorities. The political force of this movement is attested to by the fact that it is not only pushover institutions like Stanford and Duke who have changed curricula because of it, but such politically highly charged parts of the American polity as the public schools. Instances of this kind proliferate across the country.

A similar case is Jesse Jackson's decision to call blacks African-Americans, a decision respectfully accepted by the media. When black was substituted for Negro a generation ago, it made perfect sense, for Negro was one of those timid, pseudoscholarly devices for making something respectable that did not appear to be respectable. White and black are perfect coordinants. But the term African-American is not only a description but also the announcement of a normative program. Africanness is a description not merely of skin color, a thing unimportant in itself and irrelevant to the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, but of the essence of blacks living in the United States. It is a demand for the recognition of a separate status for the African inhabitants of this country and an educational reform appropriate to that background. It places unclear demands on education inasmuch as what constitutes the African-American culture is extremely vague, apart from the assertion that it is not Eurocentric. It has tyrannical implications because it is not at all clear that American blacks want to be African-American in this cultural sense. I note that in a recent poll 80 percent of American blacks still prefer to be called black, but that will not stop the alliance of Jackson and the white-dominated media from trying to impose it on them. This whole thing is dangerously close to racism because it implies that centuries of separation from and utter ignorance of Africa have not altered a core of Africanness in black persons in America. The analogy to epithets like Jew-

ish-American is spurious. No serious Jew would call himself a Jewish-American. That is a sociologist's rubric. He would say that he is an American and a Jew, one who does not make special demands on the regime because of his Jewishness, but who benefits from the separation of church and state explicit in our Constitution. He would not cover over the possible tensions between the two elements of this hyphenated bastard by hiding under it any more than a Mormon would or should hide under a phrase like Mormon-American. We do speak in the universities and newspapers of Jewish-Americans, Italian-Americans, and Asian-Americans. Judaism is a religion and Italy is a country, whereas Asian-American refers primarily to race. From a constitutional point of view, religion is an important consideration, to be freely exercised and not established, national origin is utterly unimportant, and race is a problem to be overcome for the sake of individual rights.

African-American is not a religion, not a national origin, and in this formulation meant to be something above and beyond a race. What is it then? Here is where our amorphous word culture comes to the rescue. Culture is whatever those who are a part of it say it is, without having to say why it is important and right for others to respect it. It comes down practically to the insistence that blacks need black role models in order to have self-esteem, and that myths must be invented for them, as well as for others, in order to say that they have achieved a culture. I believe this is something unheard of in sound educational theory and hostile to the spirit of this regime. It is one thing to argue that there are not enough black professors in universities because they have been discriminated against because of their skin color. It is an entirely different thing to insist that there be an African-American perspective in the universities represented by African-Americans who alone have the qualities of soul to promote it. It is not so much the pernicious political consequences of this move that alarm me, but the intellectual confusion, thinness, and deceptions that are its necessary accompaniments. It stands in the way of each person's thinking seriously about his individual situation with the help of those great thinkers who have stated the alternatives. Students are made to believe, before examining them, that those thinkers are the exclusive oppressors.

My prescription, a prescription that has no chance of being adopted, is to take those components of the college years now being given over to studies based on the idea of culture and devote them instead to studying that idea itself. That study would ask such questions as whether there is such a thing as culture, unnoticed until the nineteenth century; what guidance can we get from the idea of culture; and what alternatives to it do we have? Such a study would lead us to the peaks of the vexed and profound tension in man between his particular attachments to fam-

ily, nation, and religion, and his universal vocation as a human being. I believe that this fundamental tension is evaded by the idea of culture, but we cannot be sure unless we engage its most serious proponents. The result of such a study is uncertain, but it is what we need in order to clean up our dirty little act.

Such foci, central to important public concerns and evoking intense passions, are requisite to a liberal education, if it is to engage the best qualities of heart and mind. Almost all students today are more or less consciously in the grip of the cultural interpretation of society and have real feelings about it. Professor Hancock has criticized me for not concentrating more on the American tradition in teaching American students and leading them to a heightened intellectual awareness of that tradition. I would answer that there are many ways to skin a cat. Truth is one, but the beginning points of the road to it are almost infinite. But I would argue, in addition, that young Americans live more truly in universal abstractions than in their own tradition. Even if they were ultimately to come back to a concentration on that tradition, they would have to begin by thinking through those abstractions such as culture. I have a long experience as a teacher and I keep discovering that such general questions are the ones that appeal most to the students that I, at least, encounter. Many of those students have become distinguished scholars in American things—among others Jeremy Rabkin, Nathan Tarcov, William Galston, David Epstein, and Thomas Pangle. And I would end this apology by saying that even though our particular attachments to this country are very important, the universal questions are the ones that ultimately concern us most. In this country we have the rare, or even unique, advantage that our legislators recognized this and unabashedly referred us back to such “great civilians” as Montesquieu, who happened to be French.

A final word regarding the place of a great university among religious believers. The contemporary study of classic books by believers is akin to such study by thinkers like al-Farabi, who was attached to the Koran, and Maimonides, who was attached to the Torah. Their faith was made profounder by facing all that the world can offer rather than closing off the minds of the faithful. Such study both perfects an important human faculty that one would not want to leave uncultivated and it helps us to reflect on our pasts and plan our futures. It especially helps us to cut through the nonsense of the ephemeral contemporary, particularly when it is so theory-drenched as is ours. The study of the human condition through philosophic and literary texts is far from being a guarantee of a person’s morality. Common sense and experience teach us all too clearly that there are many decent simple people and many intellectual scoundrels, enough to persuade some people that intellectualism is a

temptation and a vice. Moral education is largely a concern of the family, the schools, and the religious community. For persons properly prepared, liberal education can be the perfection of which I have spoken. But I also do not despair of the possibility of a person's discovering, in the company of the great princes of antiquity, as Machiavelli put it, the grandeur of the issues that confront humanity and of those marvelous and liberating writers, and becoming better for it.

Notes

1. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).